

‘There’s no way this kid’s retarded’: teachers’ optimistic constructions of students’ ability

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Historical research in the field of autism has suggested that judgements regarding the ability of students with autism should be made carefully, taking into consideration the person with autism’s difficulty with communication, movement and performance in general. Although the historical literature has urged professionals to proceed with caution regarding judgements about ability, a haphazard understanding of people with autism as retarded prevails. This qualitative study analyses the experiences of four teachers who, within the context of the inclusive classroom, resist interpreting non-verbal students with autism as mentally retarded and seek to form a new understanding of ability. The following themes will be discussed: (1) finding situations where students demonstrate competence, (2) rethinking performance and understanding, and (3) expecting struggles.

Introduction

‘Get the book! Get the book!’ the children shouted as they pushed their way through the door. Sam,¹ a student labelled with autism and mental retardation who is a member of Lisa Tyler’s first-grade general education class, shoved his way through, throwing the ball he had taken out to recess aside, and headed directly toward his favourite green bean bag. He plunged down, leaned back, crossed his legs and waited. Others followed a similar path, finding their favourite comfortable spot and waiting for Lisa to begin reading. Today was chapter four of *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990). Lisa began to read: ‘About an hour later Mrs. Valerie Pickwell twanged open her back screen door ...’ (p. 20). About half way through the chapter, the principal entered and asked in a loud voice, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Reading’, Lisa replied. The principal continued, gestured to Sam and said, ‘Why is he a part of this?’ In an effort to stop the principal from going any further, Lisa asked if she could talk about this later with the principal. ‘Oh yes, we will talk about this. You can be sure of that.’ The principal

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left and Lisa continued reading and then engaged in her routine activities of discussing the events in the book, charting them on a time line, comparing characters, and looking up and recording new vocabulary. Curious about the principal's concern, I stayed longer that day. After the lesson, Lisa shared, 'She wrote me up last week for, "teaching inappropriate curriculum to a student with mental retardation"'. As Lisa shared this report with me, she wondered aloud, 'Will this be the first of many reprimands to come this year?'

The teachers who participated in this qualitative research study were all engaged in including them in the general education classroom and supporting non-verbal students with autism to participate in the academic curriculum. As I began to spend time with these teachers, I was focused on a central question: how do teachers come to know, interpret and act upon the ability of non-verbal students with autism?

Background and method

I hope for the day when I can write that deficit constructions, such as mental retardation,² are labels of the past, but I am reminded of their continued existence as I pick up the most recent edition of *Newsweek* magazine. On the second page of the article on autism entitled 'Girls, boys, and autism', the author reminds readers that 'Many [autism] sufferers are mentally retarded and require life long institutional care' (Cowley, 2003, p. 43). This notion of mental retardation is perpetuated in society by institutions as diverse as special education and popular culture, despite numerous contributions by people with autism that refute the construction of mental retardation (Grandin & Scariano, 1986; Williams, 1992; Blackman, 1999; Mukho-padhyay, 2000; Rubin *et al.*, 2001; Jackson, 2002). As people labelled with autism have shared their experiences, they have overwhelmingly described difficulty in the following areas: communication (Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001), movement (Sellin, 1995), anxiety (Jackson, 2002; Williams, 2003), sensory integration (Blackman, 1999) and performance in general (Rubin *et al.*, 2001). These autobiographies shed light on the textured and complex experience known as autism. Grandin and Scariano (1986) add depth to this texture by saying, 'Communication had been a one-way street for me [i.e. Grandin]. I could understand what was being said, but I was unable to respond. Screaming and flapping my hands was my only way to communicate' (p. 17). For Grandin, difficulty with communication depended on context and anxiety and subsequently changed as Grandin aged and had opportunities within school.

Currently people who do not talk and whose movement is marked by behaviours such as flapping are most often relegated to segregated schools and classrooms where there is little or no educational opportunity (US Department of Education, 2000; Kliever & Biklen, 2001). The conventional thought is if one moves in bizarre ways or does not speak, then there must be diminished thinking ability (i.e. mental retardation) (Rutter, 1983; Jacobson *et al.*, 1995; Rapin, 1997). Even as people labelled with autism continue to share their experiences with autism, popular media and professional understandings strip the experience of autism of its complexity by characterizing autism as a 'devastating disorder' (Cowley, 2003, p. 43).

There is nothing about autism or people with autism's behaviours that requires that one should be understood as less competent or, further, that one requires institutional care. Biklen (1999, p. 37) argues that 'Researchers have observed the actions of people with autism and have then hypothesized what their actions mean, concluding that it is *as if* the person with autism is retarded'. That is, meaning that is applied to unusual speech, body actions and behaviour is a guess based on the professional's inability to understand behaviour and communication. This guess then uses the application of a metaphor to what it means when a person does not talk or makes unusual noises—it is as if the mind is slowed down (i.e. retarded).

Although assumptions of incompetence for people who speak and move differently are widespread (i.e. seen in media images, institutionalized in funding and labelling practices), there are teachers, parents and people with autism who actively contest this understanding. It is this optimistic construction of ability that I sought to understand. I wanted to understand how teachers struggled to reject the pervasive interpretation of the non-verbal autistic student as retarded. I was interested in how teachers worked to apply new meaning to the ability of non-verbal students with autism. To do this, I had to enter the inclusive classroom, spend time with teachers and students in their natural setting, observe classroom practices, and interview teachers about their practice. Qualitative methods are well suited to this type of detailed, contextual examination. Over the course of this study, I sought to understand how other teachers came to recognize competence in their students and present them with academic opportunity.

In using the methodological traditions of interpretivist qualitative research (Ferguson *et al.*, 1992; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), it was my desire to emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality, keeping in mind that ideas like autism, ability and mental retardation are understood not to exist in an objective state, but are understood only through society's cultural, historical perspectives, and in practices that create and reproduce them.

Data were collected in two elementary schools, both in a mid-size urban city near a large university in the USA. Both schools have a history, beginning in the early 1970s, of including students with disabilities. According to the US Educational Act, known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), individuals with disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. The determination of what is a least restrictive environment for each individual is left to the judgement of the school administrators, teachers and parents. Inclusive or segregated educational placements³ are left to be determined by the educational team. The school in which I conducted my research placed students with disabilities in the general education classroom and used special education teachers as supports to the general education teacher. This, however, was not the case for all the schools within the district. Students labelled with autism who attended surrounding schools were often placed in segregated classrooms. Inclusion in this case was a decision that existed in a few instances and under fragile conditions. Within these inclusive arrangements the special education teachers co-taught, planned adaptations and provided ongoing support throughout the day within the general education class.

Table 1 describes teacher certification, the grade taught, students' names, ages, the number of interviews and the observations made. This study took place over the course of two school years and included two school sites, four teachers and six non-verbal students labelled with autism.

Participants were general and special education teachers who taught in both elementary and high school classrooms. All teachers involved in the study were certified in both general and special education. All teachers had worked previously with students with autism in inclusive classrooms. Using purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), I sought recommendations from parents and colleagues before I contacted 15 teachers to participate in the study. Based on informal interviews, I chose four teachers for participation. I chose participants based on their experience and commitment to teaching inclusive classrooms for non-verbal students with autism.

Over the course of two years, I interviewed and conducted numerous participant observation sessions in each teacher's classroom (Table 1). In using a naturalistic style, Bogdan and Biklen (1998, p. 4) suggest, 'In education, qualitative research is frequently called *naturalistic* because the researcher frequents places where the events he or she is interested in naturally occur'. As a participant observer, my goal was to spend extended amounts of time unobtrusively interacting and observing in the classrooms (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). During my time as a participant observer, I took on many different roles. At times I sat at the back of the class and observed, yet at other times I sat on the rug and sang songs, ate lunch with students, helped out with groups during centre times, worked with small groups of students, and chatted with paraprofessionals, teachers and students. Through my continued involvement in the class, I became part of the classroom routine. At first, students asked 'Why are you here?' After explaining to them that I

Table 1. Participant information

Teacher	Teacher certification	Current Grade Taught	Student with autism/age	Number of interviews	Number of observations
Margo Reed	El.Ed/Spec Ed.	General education kindergarten	Anna/6 years David/7 years	5	25
Jackie Holder	El.Ed/Spec Ed.	General education, Second grade	Alex/9 years Shantel/9 years	5	22
Michelle Lee	El.Ed/Spec Ed.	General education, First grade	Sam/8 years Jen/7 years	5	17
Lisa Tyler	El.Ed/Spec Ed.	General education, First grade	same as above	5	17

wanted to learn about their class, they often went on about their task. During many of my visits, students would seek me out for help, tell me if they were not feeling well, and in general share with me recent events and thoughts about their lives and school experiences.

Each participant observation session lasted approximately two hours. While in the classroom I often wrote notes about conversations and interactions. Upon leaving the setting, I sat down and wrote detailed descriptive field notes. I worked to reconstruct the conversations and the scenes I observed while in the classroom.

I also conducted interviews during the course of the study. I met with each teacher in their classroom to discuss interactions I had seen while observing and also specific questions regarding their planning and decision-making about including students with autism. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed. As the data collection neared completion, over 1500 pages of field notes had been typed. Strict confidentiality has been maintained. All proper names have been changed.

During data collection, themes regarding how teachers interpreted the ability of non-verbal students with autism emerged. Field notes were coded and analysed, and primary and secondary codes were constructed. Analysis of the data proceeded inductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and was ongoing throughout the research process (Richardson, 2000). From the very beginning, analysis of each participant observation and/or interview informed the questions posed at subsequent interviews. Through open discussion of field notes and emerging analytical themes, I encouraged the participants to engage actively in the ongoing process of analysis. Throughout the entire process of conducting this study, data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and analysis occurred simultaneously using the constant comparative method as a strategy.

While the teachers in this study worked to presume competence (Biklen, 1999) and looked to include students in classroom activities, this was sometimes a struggle. Teachers on occasion were at a loss how to engage students in lessons; at times they slipped back into deficit-oriented thinking and were frustrated that students could not perform. The experiences I will describe in no way should be taken as a glimpse into the ideal. Indeed, these teachers struggled. Yet, amidst the effort and momentary setbacks, the teachers' overall work was in the direction of academic engagement for non-verbal students labelled with autism. I have specifically chosen to highlight the teachers' strengths and focus on what worked for them in their endeavours to understand their students' ability. The primary aim of this research was to focus on how teachers construct students as competent when those immediately around them, and more largely the society we live in, construct those very students as incompetent. The principles, practices and perspectives learned from these teachers are not meant to further the technological list of best practices. They are shared to inspire others to understand students differently. Hope in relation to this research is bound in the possibility that others will seek to understand the experiences and the perspectives of these teachers and how they created conditions under which non-verbal students labelled with autism could participate with their peers in meaningful academic situations.

Interpreting ability

'She's the most retarded student you'll ever have. Don't expect much' (school psychologist a week before school started). Jackie Holder's introduction to Shantel, a second-grade student labelled with autism and mental retardation, did not offer much hope. Her school psychologist delivered the message that he had tested Shantel over the summer and she was indeed the 'most uneducable child he had ever met'. Shantel's speech consists of mostly echoes and repetitive phrases; she does not point or write in ways that allow her to show her understanding of requests or content. Therefore, when Shantel was unable to perform well on the standardized tests the psychologist presented, he deemed her 'uneducable' and 'retarded'. Realizing the implications of such a label, Jackie responded to the psychologist with resistance to this pessimistic understanding of Shantel. Jackie shared, 'Well I thought, "how horrible is that?" If I don't expect her to learn, you know, expect that she can learn, how will she ever?' Jackie did not accept that a student's poor performance on a test equated with a universal inability to learn. She had more hope for Shantel's educational future.

Not all members of the student study team (also known as the IEP team) shared in Jackie's hope for Shantel; this disagreement often caused conflict at team meetings. Throughout the year, Jackie had come to see Shantel as quite capable. During meetings, she would share detailed stories about Shantel's success in school. These stories were always halted by interruptions—a stark reminder for Jackie that her ideas about Shantel as competent were being challenged by those in positions of authority. Indeed, the question was raised as the principal interrupted Jackie asking, 'Who is talking about the real Shantel?' The school psychologist refuted Jackie's claims of academic gains asserting, 'I do not see that in my testing. She is functioning at the level of a 12-month-old. Clearly your claims are not possible'. Jackie again would offer scenes from the classroom, a glimpse of what Shantel was like when huddled on the ground engaged in learning with her friends, but then another interruption and the principle suggested, 'I am not sure these stories will get us anywhere. Let's just decide on the goals'. Retreating, Jackie silently let the others continue with their procedures.

In their study about the placement process of students in the special education system, Mehan *et al.* (1986) share a similar situation that occurred when teachers reported on their first-hand observations of their experiences in the classroom. They report, 'several members of [the] committee perceived the [student] differently, yet by meeting's end one version of the student prevailed: the version provided by the representatives of the school district' (p. 136). The teacher's understanding then was seen as tainted by her personal relationship with the student. The teacher's understanding held less authority in the school and placed the teacher in the position of defending her knowledge. Jackie resented district officials discounting her knowledge of the student and felt frustrated that she was consistently placed in the position of defending her understanding. Mehan *et al.* (1986, p. 136) further explain that 'The professionals' interpretation of the student, made in the context of institutional authority, and bolstered by the organization of the meeting and structure of language

used in it, overrides the lay versions of the situation'. In the context of the meeting, the teacher's understanding of the student (as well as the parents, Mehan *et al.* note) is perceived as similar to that of the layperson. Set in the language of objective science, the psychologist's report, presented in highly technical terms, goes unquestioned.

Margo Reed, in a similar situation to Jackie, was reminded by the administration to 'Tell the truth'. One afternoon as I spoke with Margo, the school psychologist walked in and said: 'You all set for our meeting tomorrow?' Margo replied, 'Ya, no problem'. The psychologist continued to offer some advice to Margo, and said, 'You know you really need to tell the parents the truth tomorrow. They need to know now that Anna is retarded. Don't gloss over it to try to preserve their feelings. Even if it is hard you have to tell them ... you know they are in denial now but they need to hear it'. Margo looked at the psychologist and said, 'See you tomorrow'. After she left, Margo commented, 'She tells me that all of the time, that I need to tell the truth. I don't have the same truth as she does ... I do think that Anna is smart'. Margo, dedicated to creating opportunities for Anna to participate, understood Anna much more deeply than the label of mental retardation would allow.

The teachers involved in this study dealt with messages from those in positions of authority that communicated less hopeful images of the non-verbal student in their classroom. Yet, despite the persistence of the understanding of mental retardation, the teachers struggled to hold onto their optimistic outlooks.

Providing access to academics for non-verbal students with autism, while more prevalent today than several years ago, is still a unique situation. Teachers were charged by the importance of their work and saw themselves, as Michelle Lee, a first-grade inclusive education teacher, suggested, 'Providing a chance to succeed'. The following are a set of practices the teachers engaged in when they took on the framework of presuming competence (Biklen, 1999, 2000a). In the following section, I will share findings organized in the following themes: (1) finding situations where students demonstrated competence, (2) rethinking performance and participation, and (3) expecting struggles.

Finding situations where students demonstrate competence

In *Effective teaching methods for children with autism* (1974), Oppenheim takes a rather progressive stance and discusses the importance of seeing educational potential in non-verbal students with autism. She writes:

The autistic child's atypical behavior and inadequate communicative abilities must not be a major deterrent of the level of the educational program that is followed with the child ... the deficiencies in the child's general functioning *including* the fact that the child may be non-verbal or non-communicative—should never be used as an index of the likelihood of his being able to absorb and benefit from teaching at higher cognitive levels—specifically his ability to learn reading, writing, and mathematics ... the autistic child should not be denied the right to intellectual stimulation that academic learning may afford him simply because his spectrum of handicaps imprisons him behind a profoundly atypical façade.

(p. 90)

Oppenheim places the responsibility of education on the teacher. She states that teachers' inability to recognize students with autism as learners would be a 'criminal waste of possible human potential' (p. 91). Oppenheim, in her writing, suggests that students with autism do show interest and engagement when supported to do so and that teachers should be keen observers in their classrooms, looking for moments of success while at the same time working to support the very context in which success can happen.

David, a five-year-old boy labelled with both autism and mental retardation, was a member of Margo's kindergarten class. David's classroom was littered with print. The ABC's, student-created posters about healthy food and a giant dictionary constituted much of what adorned the walls. Yet, with all these choices, David was particularly drawn to the small poster of US Presidents in the back corner of the classroom. He could often be found crouched down pointing to each President in succession. On one particular day I saw Donna Blumb (the classroom paraprofessional) kneeling beside him, reading the captions as David pointed. As this activity continued, Margo walked over to Donna, knelt down and said, 'Well David I see that you are interested in the Presidents. Maybe at the library today you can check out a book about the Presidents, if that catches your interest'. Later that day Margo shared with me the following:

You know I was wondering if this was an interest of his. Last week he carried around a copy of the *New York Times* that had a front-page article about the presidential candidates. I mean he carried it all week long and anytime he could he would open it and read it. I was watching him; his eyes were scanning back and forth across the print. But here's the part that really shocked me. You know how at the end of an article it says continued on B3. I was sitting there the first day watching him and I thought, 'He will not be able to find B3'. Well he proved me wrong. As soon as he got to the end of the article he flipped to the next section, right to the third page and started reading right where the article left off. That really blew me away. And later his mom told me that he got very mad last week when she tried to turn the presidential debates off. I think he has a new interest here and is learning more about it because of all of the coverage in the news.

There are many notable pieces of this interaction between Donna, Margo and David. Teachers supporting David sought to engage him around his interest. If David left his assigned task and went to read the poster of the Presidents, Margo did not try to bring David immediately back 'to task' and did not discipline him for leaving the instructional situation. Instead, she valued his initiation and saw him as a student potentially interested in abstract and sophisticated concepts like the presidency. What this educator did do was equally compelling. In following David to the poster, she engaged in student-led teaching, respected his interest and initiative, and helped him to participate in a literacy experience. Further, Margo recognized David's literacy signs (i.e. scanning the text from left to right, flipping pages, self-selection and prolonged engagement of text) as valid, although possibly different from his peers because he lacks the ability to read aloud and needs continuous help focusing. She continued to recognize these activities as

signs of literacy and further engaged him in order to expand his learning in this new area of interest.

Margo saw literacy skills when her students showed visual interest in print materials, manipulated books and choose to examine books as a play activity. Further, she was able to see the development of literacy skills even though Anna and David could not read aloud. When Anna moved from manipulating books to examining them in a more traditional manner, Margo noticed but struggled with how to interpret this fact. Margo explained that she had always thought that Anna could read. She shared, 'Well she sits and listens during read aloud and seeks out books on her own. Now she can't read aloud, but that does not mean she is not reading'. When David and Anna picked up a book, scanned the text, pointed to words, sat for extended periods during their reading group and carried books with them to school, Margo saw these as signs of literacy and, as seen in the example of David's interest in literature on the topic of the presidency, actively engaged them in expanding these skills and interests. The recognition that David and Anna were participants in the literate community (Kliwer, 1999) led to academic opportunity.

Commitment to literacy opportunities was also evident in Jackie's classroom. When she grouped students for reading, she maintained flexible arrangements within these groups and changed the arrangements often. Shantel initially was placed in a reading group based on phonics instruction. Jackie noticed that Shantel was having a difficult time with this group. She would often get up and walk away, close her book and scream during this instructional time. At times she would bite and pinch Jackie during the group. At first, Jackie did not understand Shantel's behaviour; she had always thought Shantel loved participating in a reading group. In the past, Shantel was participating with her group for 25 minutes at a time. In the process of considering this change in interest and behaviour, Jackie decided to move Shantel to another reading group that offered a more challenging literature selection. Jackie shared, 'She is having success now. I think that the work was too easy [in her old group] and she was bored. It was time for me to evaluate what group she was in and make a change'. Jackie understood that just as she was constantly evaluating the reading groups for all her other students, she needed also to evaluate Shantel's progress and adjust her group placement as she did for others.

She was amazed at the differences between the initial assessments of Shantel and the child she came to know in her classroom. In considering the different impressions that people had of Shantel (e.g. retarded, incapable of learning), Jackie wondered aloud about how 'so many of us do the book-by-the-cover thing and underestimate the abilities of students who are nonverbal'.

Jackie cast aside assumptions that led her to judge Shantel's complexity based on markers of speech and movement. She shunned the idea that Shantel be understood by outside appearances, 'by-the-cover'. Jackie was committed to understanding Shantel through a much deeper relationship. She set aside societal stereotypes and messages that told her when someone does not speak that they do not think. She refused to cast Shantel as an incapable learner and instead looked at her as a student with autism who has equal entitlement to educational opportunity.

Rethinking performance and participation

Students raising their hands, looking at the teacher, reading materials aloud and sharing answers to questions often mark traditional participation in school. At the school where Margo taught, students were actively indoctrinated into a practice called 'body basics'. One of the elements of body basics was 'keep your eyes on the teacher to show you are listening'. This suggestion does not seem unusual, but does raise the question if a student does not look at the teacher, does this mean they are not listening? As Margo considered Anna and David's participation, this is the very question she found herself asking.

One morning while observing in Margo's classroom, I sat in the back of the class and watched the students scramble around to find their places on the rug. In the middle of the circle, Anna had found her name. She sat, but was facing the opposite direction from the other students. Her neighbour Jamal leaned over and said 'turn around' and then gently nudged her shoulder toward the front. Anna shifted her body. Margo took her place at the front of the class and began welcoming the students. While I watched, the children rocked, fiddled with small items they found on the carpet and shouted answers when Margo called for them. Anna flapped her hands and spent most of the time shaking her head back and forth. The speech therapist, who had joined me at the back of the room, leaned over to me and said, 'Look, Anna is not even paying attention, what a waste'. For the speech therapist, Anna's hand flapping, lack of eye contact and rocking meant she was not paying attention and therefore wasting time. Later that day, I talked with Margo about how she thought about Anna's participation. Margo explained:

Well she is doing what I expect the other kids to do. She is listening, she comes up and moves calendar pieces when it is her turn and well, during this activity, all I am looking for the kids to do is to listen and get an idea of what will happen for the day. Why wouldn't I think that she is doing that too? Her listening looks different because she does not look directly at me and nod like the other kids do. I just think that for Anna to pay attention and listen she might just need to rock her head and flap her hands and that's OK. Her listening just looks a bit different.

Margo has expanded her idea about what it looks like for students to pay attention. For her, the movements that Anna engaged in supported her participation and were seen as one of the many ways that the students in her class participated. She clearly suggested that 'participation does not happen one way'.

In Jackie's struggle to find ways for Shantel to participate, she decided to ask herself what it was that Shantel was good at doing. She then would proceed and plan according to her strengths.

Each time I walked into Jackie's class, I found a room alive with activity. Students were spread out on the floor with clipboards and note pads, discussing the topic at hand. Students sat at back tables together and flipped through books, and some worked at their desks. There was always a low hum of noise. On one visit, I walked in and smiled at Jackie. She smiled back and motioned toward a group of students on the rug. I took a seat next to this group and asked on what they were working. 'Italy',

they responded. 'We are Italy.' The students had broken into groups and were learning about different countries. It was part of their tour of the continents unit; this month they were touring Europe. As a part of their group, Shantel and another student, Emma, worked on a large magnetic globe. Evidently, it was their job to recreate the Continent of Europe on this globe. As I watched, I saw Shantel pick up the magnetic pieces that were arranged on the rug, then look at the model that the two girls had laid out on the floor, then proceed to place the piece on the large globe, getting it in the right place each time. Her partner, Emma, and she took turns placing the pieces. At the end of the time, they had created a nice model of Europe, reporting back to their group the neighbouring countries they had located.

I asked Jackie about her decision to involve Shantel in this activity within the group. She said:

I want her to realize that she is very good at doing some things on her own. So I asked myself, 'what is Shantel good at on her own?' Puzzles. She is great at puzzles. I knew another teacher had this magnetic puzzle globe so I asked if I could borrow it. Shantel needs to learn about Europe. It is important for her to have the same academic experiences and I might as well incorporate what she is good at to do it.

Jackie thought that using a skill that Shantel was successful at would help her access the same content that the other students were learning. Shantel's participation in the group was important to Jackie. To facilitate this, Jackie planned ahead to provide Shantel with materials that would enhance her group experience. In this context, Shantel was not only expected to participate, but also given the support she needed (i.e. guidance from peers and use of a physical manipulative) to be successful.

Expecting struggles

The teachers in the study understood that while their students with autism were capable learners with much potential, these students also experienced many struggles. Among these struggles, figuring out how to support communication, social interaction and motor control seemed to present the most challenges for the teachers.

Michelle, a first-grade inclusive education teacher, had just returned from physical education (PE) with Jen. Jen and the other students gathered on the rug while I talked with Michelle in the back of the room. She expressed her frustration with Jen's performance during physical education, saying:

You know she follows directions in the class so well. She puts his supplies away, gets books when we ask ... everything, but in PE she just is everywhere. I don't know. It's like she doesn't know what is going on. Today the teacher was leading the students in stretching and she was screaming and flapping and running everywhere.

As I watched Jen during this activity, it occurred to me that this was the first time I had seen Jen struggle with participation. In so many situations in the classroom she appeared to be in control and following the routine of the class, but in PE there was something going on that would not allow her to show herself as a competent learner. Indeed, today in class, Jen did not participate successfully with the group. Michelle commented:

Sometimes it is so hard. In PE today she was a different kid. She could not follow the directions. She does not do well in physical education and I am not sure why. It is frustrating. I know I have to figure out how to make it work for her.

Michelle recognized that in the context of the PE class, Jen, at least on this particular day, did not perform the activities and skills asked of her. She saw her perform much better in the classroom situation, was confused and had to work to figure out why PE was so difficult for Jen. Most importantly, lack of 'competent' performance in one situation did not lead Michelle to believe that Jen was incompetent or that she was unable to perform in many situations. Further, Michelle continued to believe that Jen would learn to perform during PE with some practice and adjustments to the setting. She looked to how she could change supports and the situation in order for Jen to experience success.

Recently, I sat in the back of the classroom watching a maths lesson. Typically, Sam, a first-grade student labelled with autism and mental retardation, would type out his responses to the teacher's questions as they were asked. Today, even with much prompting from his aide, Sam echoed and rocked, looked at the ceiling and flapped his hands in the air. His teacher prodded, 'Sam I know you know this. You want to share your answer?' Sam repeated, 'Share your answer', and when offered his keyboard to type it out, he did nothing. His teacher replied, 'OK not today'. After class his teacher spoke to me and suggested that he might be 'nervous and anxious' due to my visit. Lisa shared, 'Sam doesn't struggle that often, but when it does happen I do not think it is because he cannot do the work or because he does not want to. I am not sure why, but at times it is just hard for him to do what is being asked of him'. Lisa suggested that during times of struggle they go on to something else or suggest that Sam stretches and gets a quick drink of water. 'Sometimes a change of pace gets him back in the groove', Lisa shared. Thoughtful reflection about Sam's struggles led Lisa to consider that a change of pace and some time might allow him to participate again in class.

The teachers in this study struggled to maintain consistent successful support of the students with autism in their classrooms. Unusual and unpredictable behaviour often presented challenges throughout the day. What these teachers had learned to do was to understand that students would struggle at times; to accept that struggle was a natural part of the process of teaching.

In addition, the teachers understood that difficulty in performance in one area did not mean that students were incompetent or incapable in many other ways. In other words, ability and performance were seen as dynamic and contextual.

Conclusion

Discussion regarding the ability of students with autism, including those who are non-verbal, historically has been presented as a complex phenomena (Kanner, 1943; Oppenheim, 1974). Specifically, researchers, teachers and most importantly people with autism who have shared that difficulty with speaking and moving one's body do not indicate a lack of understanding, disinterest or an unwillingness to comply.

Despite numerous documentations of students' struggles with movement, communication and overall performance, overwhelming current understandings have flattened out the experience with claims of mental retardation. Yet emerging in the literature is the recommendation to presume competence (Biklen, 1999, 2000b; Kliever & Biklen, 2001; Kluth, 2003). Biklen (1999, p. 208) has suggested that 'adopting the concept of "presuming competence" places an onus of responsibility on educators and researchers to figure out how the person ... can better demonstrate ability'. By presuming the competence of people who do not always demonstrate it in traditional ways, the teacher is then freed to approach the learner with thoughts and practices that would lead her/him to engage the student in meaningful academic opportunities. In doing this, the educator not only has the opportunity to provide an education similar to that of their peers, but also, as a part of this process, the teacher can work to connect the student with a disability to his/her peers, supporting interaction and allowing for the person with a disability to make contributions to the class. Findings further suggest that the label of mental retardation and assumptions of incompetence serve only to limit and separate students with disabilities from their peers and from educational opportunity. This label should be eliminated as it serves only to dehumanize, restrict educational opportunity and perpetuate a false identity.

In constructing a complex understanding of the ability of non-verbal students with autism, teachers relied on the following principles:

- Students were spoken to and treated with respect. While students did not respond verbally to their teachers and peers, the teachers spoke to students without expecting a response. Teachers acknowledged students' interest and involvement in the group. In doing this, teachers worked to connect students with their peers and to the curriculum being presented.
- Students were provided access to the general education curriculum. While students could not always demonstrate their understanding of the curriculum, teachers felt that the opportunity to participate in the typically occurring activities and lessons in the classroom was beneficial.
- Upon providing access to the ordinary opportunities in the general education curriculum, teachers were then moved to support students' performance and look for ways in which students could demonstrate their competence.
- Difficulty and struggles were seen as opportunities to adjust supports, structures and settings. Teachers found that learning arrangements such as cooperative learning groups, centres, working with partners and using hands-on materials not only supported the participation of non-verbal students with autism, but also gave them an opportunity to change their teaching in ways beneficial for all students in their class.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use the term 'labelled with' to emphasize the socially constructed nature of disability (Goode, 1992; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994).
2. I have chosen to use the term 'mental retardation' as it is one of the current labels imposed on all the students involved in the study. While other countries have discontinued use of this term,

it continues to receive regular use in the USA under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as well as in popular culture. In using this term, I wish to emphasize the idea that intellectual ability or mental retardation is always socially constructed. Further, in presenting the idea of mental retardation as problematic for people with autism, in no way am I implying that it is a useful label or construct to be applied to people with other disability labels. It is my hope that the present work will lead people to question the usefulness of this simplistic understanding for any person.

3. Inclusive education is generally thought of as the practice of placing and purposefully supporting students with disabilities in the general education setting (Falvey, 1996; Villa & Thousand, 2000). In her announcement in 1997 to the US Congress, the Assistant Secretary for special education and rehabilitation services, Judith Heumann, stated: 'Historically, we have had two educational systems, one for students with disabilities and one for everyone else. We are working to create one education system that values all students. The regular classroom in the neighbourhood school should be the first option for students with disabilities' (US Department of Education, 1997). As I entered this research and wrote about inclusive practices, I did so from the perspective that inclusion is a restructuring of the educational system to respond to and value all students' participation in the general education classroom.

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